

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is WHISPers?

WHISPers stands for Wildlife Health Information Sharing Partnership - event reporting system. It is a partner-driven, web-based repository for sharing basic information about historic and ongoing wildlife mortality (death) and morbidity (illness) events involving five or more wild animals. The primary goal of the system is to provide natural resource management partners and the public with timely, accurate information on where wildlife disease events are occurring or have occurred. The system is also a searchable archive of historic wildlife mortality and morbidity event data. The information is opportunistically collected and does not reflect all the mortality events that occur in North America.

### What does WHISPers do?

WHISPers provides a place and a reporting structure for natural resource managers and the public to learn about verified (laboratory diagnosed) wildlife disease events involving five or more animals. The records in WHISPers can be searched by species, disease, location (to county level), and event start and end dates.

### What is a wildlife “event”?

For the purposes of this system, a morbidity (illness) or mortality (death) event is defined as five or more wild animals sick or dead at the same location and time. Exceptions (fewer than five individuals involved) include endangered/threatened species, solitary species, or species of particular social, economic, or management interest to the submitting agency.

### Who can use WHISPers information?

Anyone! Basic summary information in WHISPers is provided for anyone interested in knowing more about where wildlife disease has been confirmed. This information is of particular interest for natural resource managers who need timely situational awareness of wildlife mortality and morbidity events. Knowledge of recent and ongoing events affords these professionals the opportunity to (1) proactively monitor for disease in their jurisdiction and (2) prepare for and appropriately manage these events.

Information on citing WHISPers data is listed below.

### Is this a citizen science reporting mechanism?

No, information in WHISPers is provided by partner agencies and laboratories. If you are a private individual or entity with a mortality event to report, please contact your state department of natural resources or state agency of game and fish. A list of state agencies can be found [here](#).

### What do the colored circles on the map mean?

The location information in WHISPers is provided at the county level. The circles represent a disease event, with the circle located at the center of the county. The colors of the circles represent different disease categories such as bacteria or toxins. The color key is below the map. For counties with multiple events, the color of the circle represents the disease category of the most current reported event. The number in the circle equals the number of events recorded in WHISPers that have occurred in that county. The size of the circle represents the total number of events reported in that county given the search constraints (larger circle = more events). Clicking on the circle shows more information on the events in that county. The map on the homepage displays the 20 most recent events reported in WHISPers.

## **Why are there many events in some places and no events in others?**

The information in WHISPers is collected opportunistically. Sick or dead animals must be observed, collected, submitted to a diagnostic laboratory, and the information shared in WHISPers in order to appear on the map and in the associated database. Not every mortality event that occurs is observed, diagnosed, or reported to WHISPers. Observation and reporting are more likely in very populated areas and less likely in sparsely populated locations. Some diseases, such as avian botulism, can occur repeatedly in a location. A blank space on the map doesn't mean wildlife disease has not occurred in that location.

Wildlife agencies, diagnostic laboratories, and other organizations have vast knowledge of mortality events in their area but there are technological challenges to sharing the information. A long-term goal for WHISPers is to grow the partnership and make it easier for data to be shared.

## **Why is the location information only specific to the county level?**

In discussions with partners and stakeholders, county level information was felt to be useful for providing a general overview of disease occurrence while simultaneously protecting sensitive wildlife population information and respecting landowner privacy.

## **Why is it important to track wildlife mortality events?**

Diseases affect wildlife and wildlife populations. Many diseases are quite predictable, occurring in the same locations at similar times each year. By chronicling these "typical" events, we can develop a better picture of disease impacts on wildlife across North America. With knowledge of "typical" events, it is also easier to identify departures from baseline, including new species or geographic areas affected by known diseases, or new diseases as they emerge and potentially spread across the landscape. A centralized repository of this information promotes better awareness of wildlife disease and augments opportunity for both proactive and timely reactive response by natural resource managers.

## **What data are included?**

WHISPers is designed to store summary or aggregate data from wildlife disease events, as opposed to information on each individual animal involved in the event. Each record includes location of the event (to county level), start and end dates, species involved, number of sick and dead, cause of wildlife illness or death, the laboratory where cause of disease/death was confirmed, and contact information for the agency that submitted carcasses/samples to the laboratory.

Information on citing WHISPers data is listed below.

## **Where is the information in WHISPers from?**

This information is from a variety of sources including federal, tribal, and state agencies who contacted the USGS National Wildlife Health Center for diagnostic and epidemiological assistance during mortality events; diagnostic case reports from other wildlife diagnostic laboratories; and published reports in journals, newspapers, or other reporting outlets such as ProMEDmail.org. Information from newspaper and other outlets is verified to the best of our ability before inclusion in the database.

Event information is collected and shared opportunistically and therefore may not be a complete representation of what is occurring in wildlife populations in any given time or place. WHISPers does not currently contain information from designed surveillance programs. Providing a common platform through WHISPers for partners to share wildlife event information will increase our collective understanding of when and where diseases occur in wildlife.

## **Are events from all types of wildlife recorded?**

WHISPers contains opportunistically collected general information on mortality and morbidity events involving five or more free-ranging wildlife in similar geographic space and time. It is not intended to store or track health data from wildlife maintained in rehabilitation facilities, zoological facilities and other captive settings. Currently, the majority of the events in WHISPers involve wild birds, but it also contains events involving mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and sometimes fish. It is anticipated that as the number of participating WHISPers partners increases there will be a broader diversity of events.

## **Who enters data into WHISPers?**

Currently, the information is entered by staff at the USGS National Wildlife Health Center. Future plans include providing authenticated agency partners the capability to enter information about mortality and morbidity events directly into the system, and be able to edit/update those records as needed.

Diagnostic facilities, like the National Wildlife Health Center, will also be able to enter records, if authorized by a submitting agency partner.

## **Who created WHISPers?**

The concept for WHISPers was developed by the USGS National Wildlife Health Center, in partnership with federal, state, tribal, non-governmental, and academic partners. System software was developed by the USGS National Wildlife Health Center.

## **Is this a new idea?**

For nearly 40 years, the USGS National Wildlife Health Center has been collecting and distributing information on wildlife mortality and morbidity events. Quarterly summaries of these data have been published in the Supplement to the Journal of Wildlife Diseases since 1987. These “Quarterly Reports,” dating to 1981, can be viewed [here](#). WHISPers represents a significant upgrade to these reports, with tools designed to query, map, sort, and download event data. Additionally, with partner input, the new system will provide a more comprehensive view of wildlife mortality and morbidity events across North America. While WHISPers is designed to accommodate partners' wildlife mortality and morbidity event data, it is not intended to replicate existing data management systems.

## **Where can I learn more about wildlife diseases in North America?**

For fact sheets and other information about specific wildlife diseases, please visit the [USGS National Wildlife Health Center website](#) or peruse the [Field Manual of Wildlife Disease](#).

## **How do I cite this information?**

Information presented on the WHISPers website is considered public information and may be distributed or copied. Use of the appropriate citation is requested. To direct readers to the entire WHISPers website, it is sufficient to give the address of the site in text:

Retrieved [month, day, year], from the Wildlife Health Information Sharing Partnership event reporting system (<http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/whispers/>).

To cite data obtained from WHISPers, the following citation format is offered as a suggestion:

Retrieved [month, day, year], from the Wildlife Health Information Sharing Partnership event reporting system on-line database, <http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/whispers/>.

Citations can be formatted to the style needed for your publication as long as there is sufficient information included to return the reader to the referenced information.